DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 259 100 CE 041 430

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TITLE Recruitment and Retention of Adult Basic Education Students. NAAESC Occasional Papers, Volume 1, Number 3.
INSTITUTION Northern Illinois Univ., DeKalb. Northern Area Adult Education Service Center.
PUB DATE Jun 83
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Responsibility; *Administrator Role; *Adult Basic Education; Adult Programs; Dropouts; Literacy Education; *School Holding Power; *Staff Role; Student Attrition; *Student Recruitment; Teacher Responsibility; *Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

Ideally, the total adult basic education (ABE) staff--administrators, support staff, and instructors--promote recruitment and retention activities. To aid recruitment the total staff should become well known in the community and work closely with community groups, provide tours and an open house, offer student orientation, recruit honestly and realistically, and maintain contacts with referring agencies. Administrators can aid retention by making program goals and objectives clear to staff and students, familiarizing students and staff with the language of ABE, having experienced staff provide new staff orientation, providing frequent staff development activities and meetings, getting to know students, using an advisory council, including students and staff in decision making, and being aware of staff educational and personal backgrounds. Support staff should present a friendly, helpful attitude when dealing with the public, be familiar with program goals and community contacts, promote the program, and treat students with respect. To aid retention instructors should tailor instruction to students, realize that the instructor sets the climate in the classroom, be a good listener, and allow open discussion. "Project PASSAGES-II," a retention project in Illinois, improved retention through increased orientation and optional activities planned, in part, by the students. (YLB)

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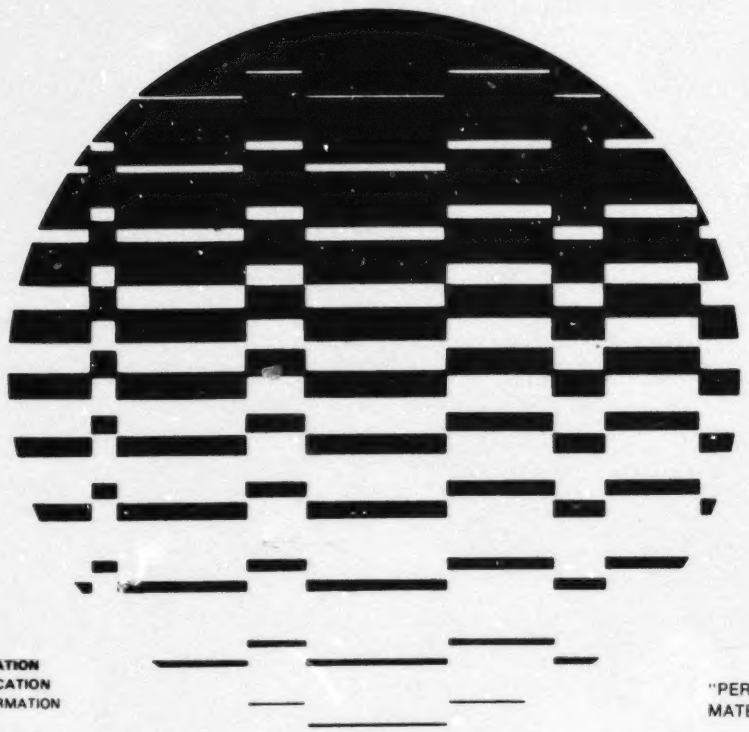

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by Sandra Ratcliff

Volume 1, Number 3 June, 1983

CE041430

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Recruitment and Retention of Adult Basic Education Students

by Sandra Ratcliff

Recent references to the problem of illiteracy in the United States (such as "A Nation of Illiterates" in the May 17, 1982 issue of U.S. News and World Reports) have raised questions about why illiteracy is still a national problem in spite of almost two decades of federal ABE funding. As adult educators, we must question why it is that we attract less than 5% of the 56 million functionally illiterate adults into our basic education programs, and why we encounter such serious retention problems with those who do enroll.

Recruitment and retention, although separate problems, should be looked at as being related. While many ABE programs have persons who specialize in recruiting students, the largest number of enrollees comes by word-of-mouth. Before they consider actually enrolling in an ABE program, they have asked friends or family members what to expect from that program. If the program has a poor retention rate, students are reluctant to enroll. Good retention, then, promotes recruitment.

Recruitment and retention activities ideally are promoted by the total ABE staff: administrators, support staff, and instructors. The following ideas are directed toward those staff groups.

Recruitment Tips for the Total Staff

1. Get to be well known in the community and work closely with community groups such as the following:

a. Agencies -- Department of Public Aid (get a desk in the office if possible and recruit students from there), CETA, WIN.

b. Organizations -- Lions Club, Moose, Rotary, volunteer groups, senior citizens, service groups (attend lunches and give brief overviews of your program).

c. Churches -- Get to know the clergy in your community; you will find that they can refer people to your program as well as provide facilities or volunteer tutors.

d. Businesses and Industries -- Find out what the educational requirements are for employees of local businesses and industries and offer to work with employers in setting up programs.

e. Libraries -- Ask librarians to provide low level, high interest collections. Provide a library card routinely to students. Encourage the library to start a tutoring program and to provide for a transfer of students to your program.

2. Provide tours and an open house at your program site. Encourage students to bring a potential student as a guest.

3. Offer a student orientation, before registration and immediately afterward. These orientation sessions help to clear up problems and to calm the apprehensions that many students have about enrolling and remaining in the program.

4. Recruit honestly and realistically; that is, don't make

promises that can't be fulfilled.

5. Maintain contacts with agencies that refer students to you by keeping them informed about the progress of these students. Success stories are always welcome and often generate new recruits.

Retention Tips for Administrators

1. Make the goals and objectives of the program clear to both students and staff.

2. Help familiarize your students and staff with the "language" of ABE; for example, explain to them the meaning of commonly used acronyms such as ABE, ESL, GED, CBE, APL, DPA, and CETA.

3. Have experienced staff members provide additional orientation for new staff members.

4. Provide frequent and varied staff development activities.

5. Provide staff meetings (part-time staff included) to allow concerns to be voiced and to provide unity among the staff.

6. Get to know the students; visit classrooms and attend orientation sessions as frequently as possible.

7. Use an advisory council. If community members feel that they are "invested" in your program, they will be more likely to encourage students to enroll.

8. Include students and staff in your decision-making process, and encourage their involvement.

9. Be aware of the educational and personal backgrounds of

your staff.

Retention Tips for the Support Staff

1. Provide a friendly, helpful attitude when dealing with the public; for example, on the phone, in the hallways, on the bus.

2. Have a clear idea of the goals of the program.

3. Be familiar with community contacts.

4. Promote the program whenever an opportunity arises.

5. Always remember that the students, both current and potential, are adults. Treat them with respect.

Retention Tips for Instructors

1. Tailor your instruction to the individuals you are teaching.

   a. Set goals with each student. Time constraints are critical for adults, so encourage them to establish a realistic time-frame in which to accomplish their goals. If they have very low skills and high expectations, set less ambitious goals; for example, "to be able to add two-digit numbers" might require two weeks instead of one; reading a certain book might be the goal for a four-week period instead of a two-week one.

   b. Provide some reward system for shorter goals. The GED test may be a long way off, so a reward such as a plant cutting, a soft drink, or even free time to work on something special can keep the students encouraged

enough to "stick with it."

c. Keep personalized records. Providing a chart for each student that shows that progress can also be a form of reward. Use a bar graph to show how well each student is accomplishing his or her own learning goals. The student is then competing with himself or herself--not with other classmates.

2. Realize that you set the climate in your classroom.

a. Make it comfortable and relaxed.

b. Allow smoking if the facilities permit.

c. Take breaks every hour.

d. Don't demand silence.

e. Avoid the look of an elementary classroom.

f. If possible, seat the group around tables, or at least move the desks to encourage interaction in the group.

g. Provide good lighting: it can make a large difference with adults.

3. Be a good listener.

a. Many students have problems, so be open--not judgmental.

b. Encourage and support students; suggest resource persons that they can call for help rather than making the call yourself.

c. If a student stops attending your class, do a follow-up (call or send a note to encourage his or her return).

4. Allow open discussion.

   a. Have students help each other: each student has a talent that can make a contribution to the class, but you must find it.

   b. Try to find some time (even 15 minutes) at each class meeting for group discussion; topics can vary from class subjects to current events. Too often we concentrate on developing the skills necessary to pass the GED test, rather than developing all necessary skills (such as speaking and listening). If, after several weeks, your students don't know each other's names, then you have lost an opportunity to create a support group that can help retain them.

In a retention project titled "Project PASSAGES II," conducted at the Venice (Illinois) Lincoln Technical Center in 1980, 130 students receiving public assistance were interviewed to determine why some of them dropped out of the ABE or GED programs while others continued to complete their goals within the programs. All of the students were women, high school dropouts, and they averaged thirty years of age. The study revealed that most students who dropped out of the program did so during the first two or three class sessions. Since large numbers of students were lost in these first few classes, the project staff felt that an orientation session might help retain them in the program. Approximately 1-1/2 class sessions were devoted to orientation, and they included all the students in the program. The students interacted through role playing,

discussions of goals, discussions of problems that would keep them from attending school (for example, babysitting, transportation), scheduling problems, etc. Expectations and regulations of the center were discussed, and suggestions were made about such things as setting up a study area at home, how to take notes in class, and, in general, how to take the fear out of returning to school. The result: retention improved by 50%.

The PASSAGES staff also provided activities for all the students in the Venice Lincoln program. These activities--58 in all and conducted over a three-month period--were optional and varied in the amount of time required for completion. They included the following:

encounter groups
panel presentations
special workshops (interviewing, resumè writing, reading the want ads, dressing for the job)
speaker's bureau (community leaders, employers, agency personnel)
speakers representing consumer concerns (electric company, bankers, grocers, mayor, police detective)
field trips (major factories, radio stations, hospitals, post office)
exercise groups and volleyball tournaments
parenting sessions
social activities (pot luck dinner, open house)

All staff members were involved (one outstanding session was conducted by the school custodian), and one-fourth of the sessions were conducted by volunteer students. Each activity was designed to meet a specific objective and was planned, in part, by the students themselves; consequently, these students became personally "invested" in the program and felt more responsible for its success. Students could participate in the activities only after their class assignments had been complete.

The activities were conducted in March, April, and May, traditionally high dropout months for the center. In spite of this, however, the results showed that retention was higher for these three months than it had been for the entire previous year. The students also completed their personal learning goals at a higher rate, and, as evidence of the tie between retention and recruitment, at least 50 new students enrolled in the program because they had heard of the activities that were taking place there. An additional benefit was realized in the corporate and community contacts that resulted from the field trips and visiting speakers; several students located jobs directly through these contacts.

Recruitment and retention do not have to be major problems for an ABE program. Adults make a choice to enter a program and make a choice when to leave a program. Although problems such as illness, transportation, time, and family concerns can prevent a student from attending a class, students will continue in a program despite these problems if they find the classes to be comfortable, challenging, interesting, and worthwhile. The ABE staff efforts can make the difference.

About the Author

After teaching special education in both Georgia and southern Illinois, Sandra Ratcliff spent three years as an ABE instructor at the Venice Lincoln Technical Center in Venice, Illinois. She is currently serving as the President-elect of the IACEA, the Associate Project Director for the NAAESC in DeKalb, and as an instructor in Adult Continuing Education for Northern Illinois University.